

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year

Trinity Church, December 19, 2010

Matthew 1:18-25

My favorite Christmas carol is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Phillips Brooks' thoughtful words lift the birth of Jesus out of the particulars of history and translate that tender human scene into a spiritual condition that embraces all of humanity across all of space and time -- a universal frame of mind and heart.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Hopes and fears: It is the insight that led Kathleen Norris to write that "the incarnation -- God with us in our humanity -- is the place . . . where hope contends with fear."

The paradox and mystery of it all is that the intersection between time and eternity centers around a particular human man and woman at a specific place and moment in time. Their individual characters and the quality of their relationship with each other set the conditions for Jesus to emerge as the Savior of the world. Otherwise, Joseph and Mary were ordinary people, living within the circumstances imposed by their own culture, unusual only in the strength of their character and the quality of their faith.

Christians across the centuries have tended to treat Jesus as having been fully adult from the moment of his birth. Early Christian paintings and icons of the mother and child, show Jesus as a miniature adult, his hand raised in blessing. But for Jesus to become as fully human as he is fully God, he needed to pass through all of the human experience; from the moment he was thrust naked and vulnerable into a cold world, through the joys and dangers of childhood and the trials and dilemmas of youth, until his emergence into complete and perfect maturity. For those things to happen, he needed a family. All of that is a part of Christ's being "God with us." He needed the right mother and father, and God provided them in Mary and Joseph.

Mary, the mother, takes the central part, and rightly so. She accepted a role that to all outward appearances was ambiguous and dangerous. She didn't simply submit passively to what was in any case inevitable. She

accepted the condition actively and joyfully, in spite of all its risks, all of its physical difficulty and public embarrassment, as a gift from God. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my heart rejoices in God my savior!"

Mary's role was basically determined by the inevitabilities of motherhood; but Joseph's situation was more complicated. For today, Joseph, his character and his faith is the focus of the Gospel.

We can understand Joseph's anguish and confusion when he learned that his intended bride was expecting a child, and with the information at hand there was only one possible explanation. The expected child was the result of an adultery. That was not an unprecedented situation, either in their day or ours; but in ancient Judea, the law insisted upon a cruel choice. Family honor and prestige were at stake. The engagement, under the law, had the legal effect of marriage, so it gave the husband – to-be the right and the responsibility of deciding how the issue would be settled. Joseph had three choices and none of them was happy. He could have the woman stoned to death for adultery. Almost as bad, he could divorce her publicly and condemn her to life of shame and poverty. The least hurtful option was simply to void the marriage contract privately. There would inevitably be gossip. Both families would suffer. And none of that even took into account the future of the child himself or herself.